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ABSTRACT

A small rural elementary school in Bigelow, Arkansas has developed the Levelized Educational Advancement Program (LEAP) to offset diminished financial resources, limited classroom space, and reduction in professional staff. The program provides individualized basic education for 116 students in grades 4, 5, and 6, and provides daily enrichment opportunities using community resource persons as substitutes for educational opportunities more readily available in urban areas. School staff recruit community members who have talents in arts and crafts or who know local history, customs, geography, and nature. Nearby federal and state agencies and private organizations also participate. Five classroom teachers conduct the program with goals to fulfill student needs, raise test scores, and satisfy class size requirements. The students are divided into five 1-hour instructional groups of approximately 24 students for reading, mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts. Assignments are made according to student abilities rather than grade placement. Instructional time is divided into five equal parts so that each group rotates through the schedule with an additional hour for special activities. Program evaluation includes informal comments of parents, teachers, students, and school board members, discussions between professional staff and principal, and formal evaluation by members of a nearby university. (LFL)

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LEVELIZED EDUCATIONAL ADVANCEMENT PROGRAM

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LEVELIZED EDUCATIONAL ADVANCEMENT PROGRAM

Introduction

Rural and urban public schools share many basic educational concerns in providing appropriate and free education for students. To meet individual needs of students and state-mandated reforms, rural schools, especially, have had to make innovative use of shrinking financial resources and limited facilities. Rural schools have had to seek teachers with multiple certifications or entice staff to obtain additional college training in order to maintain an accredited educational program. However, the major consideration concerns the rural culture itself. It is suggested that students in rural schools benefit from increased care and concern through strong family ties, teachers who know families as well as the students, and a strong sense of community.

Incorporating these ties and sense of community, the Levelized Educational Advancement Program (LEAP) is a program developed to address the issues of diminished financial resources, limited classroom space, and a reduction in professional staff in the Anne Watson Elementary School of East End School District #1 in Bigelow, Arkansas, population 373. The program seeks to provide individualized basic education for each of the 116 students in grades 4, 5, and 6, and to provide daily opportunities for enrichment through resource persons in the community as substitutes for zoos, movies, musical events, plays, museums, and other similar educational opportunities more readily available in urban areas.

The program has endeavored to bring into the school local persons with talents in arts and crafts, those who know local history and customs, and those who study local nature and geography.

Community Involvement

To involve the community, teachers, administrators, and nonspecific staff actively identify and recruit persons residing in the community who have special talents and expertise and who are willing to come to the school to share these skills. These persons are matched with the activities requested by teachers and students.

In addition, nearby agencies and organizations willing to participate have been identified and invited to do so. Examples include a quartet from the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, the ARVAC program on drug abuse, presentations by the U.S. Forestry Service on fire safety and conservation, and the Three Wheeler Safety Program by the Farm Bureau. In addition to teaching duties, the professional staff often serve as resource persons as well as hosts for other resource persons and groups.

Educational Considerations

In order to maintain a quality education program, consideration was given to seven factors:

Meeting the diverse needs of students

Increasing achievement

Increasing performance test scores

Satisfying state-mandated teacher-pupil ratios

Solving the problem created by increased enrollments and limited classroom space

Managing severe budget cuts, and

Addressing staffing complications brought on by a reduction in staff with no corresponding decrease in workload

Directly affected by those factors were five classroom teachers who met with the principal to frame three critical goals, drawn from the concerns listed above: (1) fulfill the needs of the students, (2) raise test scores, and (3) satisfy class size requirements.

The Levelized Educational Advancement Program

The Levelized Educational Advancement Program (LEAP), designed collaboratively by the faculty, and approved by the board of education, is as follows: The 116 students were divided into five one-hour instructional groups of approximately two dozen students each for reading, mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts. Each of the teachers assumed responsibility for one of the five content areas.

Assignments were made according to student abilities rather than by arbitrary grade placement, hence the term "Levelized" in LEAP. Criteria considered in placing the students included teacher recommendations, standardized test scores, parental consultations, and informal student inventories in reading and math.

The instructional time was divided into five equal parts so that each group rotates through the schedule. In an additional hour of instructional time, students participate in special activities: library work, art, introductory French, gifted and talented education, physical education, special education, remedial reading, animal care club, special videocassette and film presentations, and a variety of presentations prepared by local resource persons or made available by area agencies and organizations.

Evaluation

The program is or will be evaluated in three ways. First, informal evaluation is obtained from parents, teachers, students, and school board members. Many written comments indicating high regard for the program and its efforts have already been received from these groups. Second, the professional staff and principal meet informally, having lunch together almost daily. Successes and small problems are discussed and plans for resolving difficulties are made during this time. More important issues are addressed on a weekly basis during regular faculty meetings. Finally, the program will be formally evaluated through the Center for Academic Excellence of the University of Central Arkansas.

Limitations

The most critical issue to be resolved is the acceptance and cooperation of those involved. Without the support of teachers, parents, administrators, and school board members, the program would not have been successful.